

Tradition and Change: Four People

A Response to the Politics of Paradox
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Foreword

The Politics of Paradox (POP) is a collection of essays written by proponents of Blue Labour with responses based on a series of seminars.

Blue Labour's thesis is that having lost the election, we need a thorough re-examination of our ideas and a return to concepts and practices prevalent at the founding of the party. Maurice Glasman – the lead editor - has been involved in the ground breaking London Citizen's movement for the living wage. His central argument is that we need to return to the community based practices of the late 19th century Labour movement and that if we do we shall effect change in people's lives building solidarity and reciprocity which has a real meaning and value to them, far greater than the abstract philosophical principles of equality and justice. This approach strikes a real note of relevance, because many people feel their lives are insecure and that social ties and obligations have been undermined by globalisation. Sometimes the state institutions set up to tackle problems descend into bossiness and bureaucracy, leaving people feeling frustrated and powerless.

I want to begin my response with two stories about communities in my constituency. The first impression might be that these are very traditional and would benefit from the Blue Labour approach. But if we look more deeply, it becomes clear that while voluntarism and co-operation have a part to play – the forces and structures in the modern world require far more than this for them to flourish.

Unusually for a Labour seat, my constituency covers 800sq kilometres, covering the whole of Teesdale. It stretches from the Pennines in the west to the former mining villages clustered in the shadow of Durham Cathedral.

The Reeve's Tale

It is a snowy February morning; already 4 inches have fallen overnight. I drive up to the Red Lion in Cotherstone, a pretty village, for the annual meeting of the stint holders on Cothestone moor. I am concerned that snow will prevent the hill farmers from getting to the meeting. I need not have worried; one by one they arrive, kick off the snow from their boots and take a mug of instant coffee. Everyone (except me) is on intimate terms, families have farmed here for generations. Today the stint owners include women.

The hill farmers of Teesdale are a paradigmatic co-operative community living in harmony with each other and with nature. In Weardale the hill farmers are owner-occupiers, because the Church which had been the landlord sold its land in the 1930s. But here in Teesdale they are tenants mainly of the Raby and Strathmore estates. The Vane family took Raby Castle in 1627. Recently the Earl of Strathmore was divorced, to finance this he had to sell some land. Reputedly one of the landlords is now a Saudi Prince.

Being a stint holder means, not having a share in the land ownership, but having rights of common grazing. My constituency has 10,000 hectares of commons, the largest of which are Bowes moor, Cotherstone pasture, Barningham moor, Egglestone common, Cockfield fell and Hamsterley common. There are 39 commons in all. These rights and this way of life existed prior to the Northern Rebellion of 1569 and the farmers exemplify what RH Tawney called "the doctrineless communism of the open field system".

In 2006, the Labour Government introduced a Commons Bill to revise and update the Commons Act 1285, passed in the reign of Edward I. That is a very short piece of legislation – less than one column long – and began:

"Whereas in a Statute made at Merton, it was granted that Lords of Wastes, Woods and Pastures might approve the said Wastes, Woods and Pastures, notwithstanding the contradiction of their tenants, so that the tenants had sufficient Pasture to their tenements with free...the same".

We are often criticised in Parliament for producing too much hasty legislation, which we have not had time to properly consider properly. The 1285 Act however had a good run.

It is interesting that the problems in 1285 were similar to those that we addressed. Among other things it emerged from the discussion of the 2006 Act that half the commons in this country are sites of special scientific interest, which many people found surprising at first. As we considered the bill in more detail, however I realised that this was not an accident: the reason why commons are so environmentally important is that landowners have historically not had the same rights or financial incentives to sell or develop this land.

There is a general lesson for all of us, in our work on protecting the environment, in the great value of taking collective responsibility. This Act showed that it important to continue

managing commons in the interests of all stakeholders- landowners, tenant farmers and those with interests in sport and walking. In my constituency that is especially important for the hills farmers and the environment as part of it is an area of outstanding natural beauty.

We have a unique biodiversity- and plants such as the Teesdale gentian- which grow only here and have flowered since the last ice age. They are threatened by climate change. The Act democratised a process with new commons councils being set up and measures to protect village greens for shared use. It was supported on all sides of the House.

The discussion in Cothestone covers stock prices. Prices are up a bit since the 2001 Foot and Mouth epidemic, but still problematic. The incomes of hill farmers are low, many earn under £15,000. Those with families claim tax credits. There is a consideration of the rapid spread of rushes, which are destroying grazing. There is a lot of concern that the well intentioned botanists at Natural England who advise Defra on the levels of stock which are sustainable may take too short-term a perspective. Talk turns inevitably to the abysmal (verging on abusive) standards of administration by the Rural Payments Agency, which make the Child Support Agency look like a model of streamlined efficiency.

Finally, there is a conversation about the shooting: someone has gone back through the Raby shooting book: the AONB black grouse project to establish the bird is working, but now the pheasants are too tame; they won't fly which spoils the sport! Action points are agreed and the minutes are taken by the Field Reeve.

Rural Politics

At first glance, the politics of paradox, Blue Labour, appears to be wholly empathetic to the hill farmers. Here is a very long-standing community operating on co-operative principles, mutually responsible and it is this very mode of production which has protected the environment.

The Labour government did not do especially well by these people and we need to think again. The party is too urban and fails to respect rural communities, or understand their skills and brings its foolish and inappropriate prejudices about shooting – which is essential to the local economy to debates on rural life. I am ashamed of the way the Rural Payments Agency operated a ludicrously over complex system. Computer generated maps bore no relation to actual geography; arrogant officials showed nothing but disdain for their fellow citizens and I could buy Bowes moor for myself if I had £5 for every time I had been told “we can't do that because of European Rules”. Finally, we should have stood up to the landlords on behalf of the stint-owners, because they cream off efficiency improvements in higher rents.

But the fact is that we cannot end government involvement in this community – we need to transform it. Without CAP support the farmers would not be able to make a living, farms would be bought up by conglomerates; ranching would take over; the field system be

destroyed and with it the meadows and biodiversity we all want to see flourish. The beautiful landscape is a product of the inter-relation between man and nature. We love it – this is England and woe betides she who fails it.

Furthermore the national and international community also has a common interest in looking after the peat moors, our carbon sink store. Britain has 15% of the world's peat and the carbon equivalent stored is equivalent to 20 years worth of national industrial emissions. This is expensive – involving blocking grips (streams) under negotiated arrangements with tenants and landlords.

We need to learn how to listen to communities, we need public servants skilled in negotiation, who understand the overall objectives and can act flexibly, effectively, away from the ludicrous culture of box ticking and targets. In an area without broadband we need to stop the stupid over-reliance on IT and crazy ideas like ID tags for sheep! Disease control should start at the markets not on the hill.

International Trade

But at the same time the truth is that food markets are international and we belong to the European Union. Unless we want to go over to a ultra-green self-sufficiency model of production and no-one in the Labour party is advocating that. We have to have democratically accountable institutions to represent our interests and negotiate solutions – this is called government – or the state if you like. And it's surprising that in his comments the former Foreign Secretary doesn't make this point.

In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre wrote one of the most brilliant histories of philosophy, demonstrating the weakness of the utilitarian approach which has dominated public policy for a century and pointing to the importance of an understanding of Aristotle. This analysis, shared by POP has a lot going for it, but it is worth noting that MacIntyre ends with a call for us to live in small "Benedictine communities", which is totally unrealistic given our demands for comfort and the technology available.

Maurice Glasman has been involved in the Billingsgate fish porters and I agree with him – they are a community whose value cannot be reduced to £SD. But, for them to flourish, we must also have policy on over-fishing and fish discards. That means talking not just with our own Scottish and Cornish fishermen, but also with the Icelanders, the Greenlanders, the Norwegians and the Spanish. This is the role of government.

We live in an open international economy and it was ever thus. Go to Devon see the towers on village churches, borrowing as architectural models the famous Bruges hexagonal. Why is this? It's because in the 13th and 14th centuries the wool trade took Englishmen to Flanders and brought Dutchmen here. Norfolk was rich because it was near the Hanse league. The narrow conception of the nation of England, which Blue Labour appears to have taken isn't just deeply culturally unattractive it's historically false.

Over Reliance on Market Philosophy

So let us return to the farmers and consider what else they need. The NFU is currently running a campaign, (initially taken up by the WI) on milk. Their complaint is that from one pint of milk the farmer can get as little as 2p. And they are quite right. This is unjust.

The European milk market is dominated by international conglomerates who systematically exploit small farmers. For example – and I am sure readers will be as shocked as I was to discover this – it is legal to cut prices retrospectively on asymmetric contracts which the farmer cannot end. This means that a farmer can sell milk for three months at say 11p/pint, but in the second 3 months the purchaser can say that henceforth and for the previous 3 months the purchaser can say the price will be 10p/pint – which means that during the second 3 month period they receive 9p/pint.

What makes this worse is that both this practice and the role of supermarkets have been investigated by the OFT and found to be satisfactory.

What has gone wrong here and I agree with Blue Labour about this is that the ideology of free markets took such a grip on some politicians and institutions that criticism of policy became impossible other than from within the paradigm. Thus the governing legislation (passed by the Tories, unreformed by New Labour) setting out the powers of the OFT are framed in such a way that without evidence of “market failure” no action can be taken.

The OFT is the same institution which has found no problems with the notorious Home Credit market (legal loan sharks) which charge 276% interest rates in the poorest communities, despite evidence of barriers to market entry and despite the fact that much tougher regulations obtain in Germany and France. It’s called the Office of Fair Trading, but fairness doesn’t get a look in! This is one example, but it’s emblematic of our weakness in addressing powerful vested interests and a lack of intellectual self-confidence in critiquing dominant ideologies.

We need to restore a sense of the public interest, which goes beyond market failure. Our failures to protect the weakest participants in our domestic markets were matched by our inability to take action in international markets. Up to the 1980s there were international commodity agreements, which held stocks to stabilise prices on international markets – They covered food staples – wheat, cocoa and coffee, but also precious metals such as tin. As a very junior Treasury official I was responsible for monitoring them, but they were swept away, partly because of an inability to tackle corruption in the administration effectively, but also in the flood of Thatcher-Reagan “reforms”. So now we have the obscenity of Nestle suing Ethiopia and Ghanaian cocoa farmers being starved to death by irresponsible speculation.

We have a good record on aid, but reform of the international trading system in a pro-poor direction and to take account of environmental realities is needed urgently.

Blue Labour's community organising is a good idea, but it is not enough for the British Labour Party. As Barack Obama (community organiser world No.1!) reminded us, when he spoke to both Houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall, we have responsibilities for the shape of the world. The fact that the fair-trade market has grown and the new government is proposing to legislate to maintain 0.7% aid demonstrates that this is now in the mainstream of the British political landscape – it would be madness to vacate this territory.

Public Services

And what else do the Teesdale hill farmers need? Well, as noted they benefit from tax credits, and village schools, and post offices and properly maintained roads and all the social infrastructure of the modern world. Of course community activity is strong, but it cannot replace high quality, properly funded public services and government is needed for that too.

The Miner's Tale

It is a hot Sunday afternoon in July. The sun is beating down and I am worried about getting burnt and wishing I had put on sun cream. I am sitting on the platform at Durham racecourse, a huge crowd spreads across the field, there is a fun fair, stragglers of the procession and over 90 brass bands and banners continue to march down into the field. Dennis Skinner is speaking. He rouses the crowd to emotional heights, reminding them who they are; what brings them here: what socialism means. It is the Miner's Gala.

One of Tony Blair's follies was not to come to the gala. To fall out with the Durham miners when you are a Durham MP is heresy. This was one of the most annoying traits of New Labour-constantly challenging what people valued.

To think the gala is about politics in the narrow policy wonky sense is a huge error. It is when Durham people say we are here, we are Durham, this gives us meaning.

The Big Meeting began in 1885, is rooted in the history and traditions of mining in Durham and across the north. It begins early in the morning, when people in villages across the county march behind their own banner and band and listen to the miners' hymn in commemoration of miners who died in their villages in years gone by. Then they get on the bus and go into Durham for the Big Meeting.

The number of banners is growing again and this year there will be a parade of 100 banners and bands. There are two competitions, the first explicit: which village band is best, the second implicit which Labour MPs can place themselves on the balcony of the County Hotel waving to the crowds of yesteryear like the giants of old at precisely the right moment to be captured by the Northern Echo photographer.

It ends at the racecourse, where people will listen to speeches and enjoy the fairground. The whole day is an affirmation of the human spirit. Life and leisure are not about shopping – they are about history, music and the values of solidarity and community. A family day when money and the media and all the commercial entertainments are totally absent and everyone ends on a real high. When a village raises a new banner, it is taken to the cathedral and blessed by the Bishop.

The festival is on the cusp, but it is not yet folklorique and one way the Durham miners have kept it fresh has been by introducing an international element – bands are invited from across Europe even the world and speakers come from Latin America to remind us that the struggles we overcame in the late 19th Century are still very much alive for them.

Glasman says "Philosophical arguments aspire to be universal but remain unsuited to either political action or ethics".

Nothing could be further from the truth. The Durham miners understand this as did the old man from Derby whom I met who had been born in a workhouse and went to fight in Spain and it is incredible that POP argue against it.

Modern Bureaucracy hits Community Life

But the local village marches like other community events are threatened by the dreaded compensation culture. A so-called health and safety expert belonging either to the county council or the police – I do not know which, because both organisations blame each other – has said that, although the village parades last only 20 minutes, they must fulfil a list of bureaucratic requirements. That means that they must put up notices of road closures two or even three weeks before the event. Moreover, the notices must be made to a particular specification by a private traffic management company, and they must be put up by trained operatives, because of the alleged risks that crossing the road poses to ordinary citizens.

The cost is proving to be astronomical. After the 2005 gala, I received a list of complaints from people throughout the county. The County Durham Association of Local Councils carried out a survey, which found that the costs sometimes amounted to hundreds of pounds. For example, they ranged from £294 to a staggering £1,580 and 70% of villages have said that the costs involved might dissuade them from holding an event in the future.

There are many rural villages in the west of my constituency. They hold carnivals along traditional lines and are facing the same problem. For example, at one year's remembrance service in Middleton in Teesdale, a veteran was told that she could not carry the Union Jack because she was over 60 and would not be safe in the traffic.

We all want proper health and safety legislation in factories and building sites. Miners are the first to recognise this! But a combination of foolish legal judgements, risk aversion, petty-minded bureaucracy and general bossiness is regularly putting law abiding people at odds with the state that is meant to protect them. Costs, problems and risks are taken into account, but not benefits. We are destroying not only enjoyable days, but communities. Communities are like families, they need to do things together- they need to maintain social cohesion. We are in a crazy situation where we are paying people to set up community development offices and to run initiatives, while we are destroying the home-grown ones, that produce the social capital, trust and local knowledge that people enjoy and gives security. The New Labour Government, too dominated by London lawyers, failed to see or tackle this effectively and now the ground is being taken by the Tories in their promotion of Royal wedding street parties. Blue Labour are right we need to get this back before it is too late.

The Far Right

All of this has a political dimension too. It is in the rundown areas of small towns like Spennymoor and Shildon that we have had to struggle against the British National Party.

The cause of their rise is easy to understand. In 2005 I opened a new Electrolux plant – hundreds of jobs, millions of pounds of investment supported by our Regional Development Agency. By 2008 it was closed, moved to the Czech Republic. People don't just feel disorientated, they feel anxious about their ability to pay the mortgage and for their children's future when as one man told me, he was now the only English speaker on his shift.

And while we have been successful in the political struggle, through sheer slog on the streets and with the support of the churches, the trade unions and the Daily Mirror, the truth is we need an effective economic strategy, one that will deliver jobs and a reasonable degree of security.

Economic Development

If you were to ask the former miners now in their 60s and 70s what realistic hopes they have for their grandchildren and their futures they would see three possibilities:-

- (1) The first is get educated and join the middle class: This is the route bright working class children have now had for 60 years - grammar school, up and out, the 1944 Education Act; the expansion of further and higher education. For those who had forgotten their history, the coalition government's policies on tuition fees demonstrate how dependent this is on a benign, socially concerned, active government. We need to have effective policies to ensure that working class girls in Spennymoor have the same chances as middle class boys in North London to fulfil their potential and this will only happen if we are committed to certain values and arrange things to facilitate it.
- (2) But let's be honest – not everybody's child is going to be a university lecturer, the fact is there will also always be jobs like cleaning hospitals or being a bus driver which need to be done properly and competently but don't "lead" anywhere. But people who do these jobs are perfectly entitled to proper pay, pensions, terms and conditions, decent homes and neighbourhoods. And again it's difficult to see how this fair distribution of resources can be achieved without free trade unions, a strong legal framework and – yes – active government.
- (3) The third option – and one which Labour pursued successfully, though not on a sufficiently large scale is "modern manufacturing"; the "white heat of technology" etc. It requires a strong science base; a high-skilled workforce and partnerships between universities; public and private sectors. There is a lot more mileage to be had out of this, especially given the need to re-engineer our economy on a low carbon basis, but anyone who is either unaware of the destruction this government is wreaking or fails to understand its significance is living in cloud cuckoo land. I can see nothing in the Blue Labour essays about this, which is quite extraordinary.

All three options require effective government. I agree with Blue Labour we need reformed company law and more tax breaks for people to set up co-ops, mutuals and employee share ownership schemes. We need regional banks and stronger industrial democracy like our European neighbours.

We also need to shift away from the over-reliance on financial services. But the level of ignorance displayed in POP about this is astounding: Rutherford says “the bank bailout capped (the) transfer of wealth with one gigantic bonanza”. Evidently Keynes is another thinker Blue Labour feel competent to jettison.

But as far as I can tell capitalism isn't going away. We have to channel it and regulate and keep up with it. You can't get off the roundabout, redesign it and step back on again. You've got to redesign it while it's moving round. Otherwise China and India and the Czech Republic really will take our whole competitive base. Outside London the Regional Development Authorities did a great job in co-ordinating partnerships and planning infrastructure and effective local authorities can make a difference too.

Two recent Durham successes demonstrate what is needed. First a new lightbulb factory was built by Thorns in Spennymoor. The decision was taken in Austria, but we won because of the incubator set up by the last Labour government to facilitate R&D and technology transfer with Durham University. Secondly, Hitachi have just decided to place a new train factory here and when the County Council organised a conference for the supply chain, there were 4,000 participants and some were local, some European and one even came from Brazil.

So while I agree we can change company law and tax rules to encourage industrial democracy and employee share ownership. We have to contend with big multinational companies. We don't want to reproduce the isolationism of the mid 19th century China, so we need to set rules with international partners on a multilateral basis. In sum, unlike in the 1890's it's capitalism not just trade which is truly international and we need to grasp the implications of this.

Government is needed both to attract foreign investment, but also to negotiate a level playing field at multilateral level, so we have proper environmental and labour standards and a fair trading environment across the world.

Looking Back

The history embodied in the POP narrative seems to be curiously selective and partial, with a taste for the abstruse and obscure. Robert Blatchford (author of *Merrie England* and founder of the British Socialist Party) is a particular favourite, while the part played by, for example, the chartists, the trade unions and the suffragettes in the development of modern radical politics is ignored.

In all histories of institutions, the role of the founders looms large. The Labour Party is no exception and yet the risk with looking so tightly to the party's own tradition and history is that we privilege ideas, activities and people of the period 1890-1910, which of course have some interest to us now, but are largely relevant to the concerns and conditions at that time. In POP's account, things went wrong when we lost this perspective and 1945, 1966 and 1997 were in fact moments of failure not success, because they didn't sufficiently embody the practices of the late 19th century movement. This risks a return to the fruitless quest for socialist "purity" and re-enforcing the old myth of betrayal. It could become a great politics for opposition.

As Nye Bevan warned in *In Place of Fear*, ancestor worship is the most conservative of all religions. Raphael Samuel in his wonderful collection, *Theatres of Memory*, says: "Ancestor worship usually involves a double misrecognition both of our own qualities and those of our predecessors, each by a process of osmosis is apt to take on the idealised character of the other. Ancestor worship is premised on a necessary falsification of the past. Nothing is more chameleon than tradition. We all have half a dozen possible ancestors to choose from and fantasy and projection can furnish us with a dozen more. It necessarily involves selectivity and silence. "And in *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm argued that it is a name given to something which is constantly being made and remade.

Yet Glasman sanctimoniously claims "it is an enormous comfort that we have our tradition to guide us now".

Throughout POP emphasise the importance of religious narrative and yet they want to discard the 1945 story which is widely shared and works well for us. Like all myths this story serves a function in binding us together. People today from across the political spectrum are even going around saying the essence of Britain is the NHS. I'm not sure whether this is quite right, but it's a triumph for progressive values and abandoning it now, when so much else is under attack seems perverse.

However, the main reason POP's re-interpretation of the last 125 years will not convince is that almost everyone in Britain is part of that history and has their own direct and indirect knowledge and memories of the issues under discussion. And these confirm that 1945, in particular was a great turning point, whatever the incidental failings of Labour governments.

It is a fact that my father benefitting from the 1944 Education Act was able to train as an architect in the 1950s and I was able to go to university, whereas my grandfather had left school at 13.

It is a fact that in the 1920's my mother-in-law stood at the pithead in Thurnscoe when there were accidents to see how many and who had been killed. Whereas after nationalisation, health and safety standards improved and the number of accidents fell hugely.

It is a fact that between the wars my grandmother collected insurance subs for the ambulance, after the advent of the NHS this wasn't necessary. You could of course argue that this community building activity was lost, but most people would prefer to dial 999 in an emergency.

Most people involved in progressive politics will have a fund of similar stories, so that while we know that mistakes were made by Labour governments; it is true that some things of value have been lost and indeed many of us can think of things with which we profoundly disagreed, the suggestion that all has been error and futility since 1945 and we should return to the 1890's is both bizarre and wrong.

The same is true of the revalorisation of 1997. There were problems which POP are right to point to (and to which I will return later), but there were also triumphs: Sure Start, the minimum wage, constitutional reform, equality for gay people. The litany is familiar precisely because there is a consensus that these were indeed improvements. And there is a risk with POP's hyper-critical tone in that it risks being hijacked by those who want to destroy the welfare state and being ignored by others who need to listen to some valid criticisms if we are to do better in the future.

But we must not tarry too long on history lest we fall into the Polish trap of spending 90% of our energy arguing about the past and only 10% on the future. So let us turn two people badly affected by the Coalition cuts and see what their stories tell us about the situation we face now.

The Mother's Tale

I am sitting in the front room of a council house with a constituent, a single mum, who wants to talk to me. Sharon has three jobs: as a teaching assistant, as a dinner lady and finally as the school cleaner to keep her 3 teenage sons. She wants them to go to a good local school and came to see me, because she couldn't afford the bus fares which are going up by £540 this year. She is not to blame, she is to be applauded. She is not the culprit, she is the victim.

I have lost count of the number of separated mothers who have come into my surgery at the end of their tether, because the absent parent is refusing to pay child maintenance, or are worried that abusive fathers are going to get access to their children (because as far as I can tell the best interests of the child are trumped by the man's right to a family life). The average family break-up causes poorer women and children and richer men. This is a disgrace for which both individual absent parents and state agencies should take responsibility, address and change.

Women and the Need for Feminism

In the opening essay of *The Politics of Paradox* Glasman characterises as female all the aspects of New Labour he dislikes, whereas all the characteristics he applauds he draws as male, in an extended metaphor of the nuclear family. This rhetorical device was of course famously used by the author Genesis. It looks more like something suitable for the psychotherapists' couch than a political tract.

If Glasman thinks that we will all greet this with an ironic post-feminist smile he is wrong. How can we in a country where 1,000 women are raped each week, usually by a partner or ex-partner; where the gender pay gap is some 20%; and fewer than one judge in five is a woman?

In a quite extraordinary passage on family life, Jonathan Rutherford writes, "The narrative of a patriarchal social order that they sustained ensured the reproduction of normative family and social relations, status hierarchies and moral values. They transmitted a common life down through the generations – mankind, fraternity, masterful, sons of free men, faith of our fathers. This patrimony has now been fragmented and disrupted by changing cultural attitudes, new patterns of work and the growing independence of women".

What on earth does he mean?

First he seems to be harking back to a Janet and John 1950's era which didn't really exist for most women. Does he want to exclude women from the paid workforce? Working class women have always worked. My great grandmother was sent to work in a Nottingham lace factory at the age of 9, (just as described in *Capital* Vol 1.) In my constituency there is a lightbulb factory and 90% of the shop-floor workers are women (it has been like this since

before WW2) who must fit this round their caring responsibilities. This is why the enhanced maternity rights, equal pay and flexibility won by successive Labour governments are so important.

Perhaps POP want a really radical approach – say the repeal of the 1865 Married Women’s Property Act. As Rowan Williams pointed out in *Lost Icons* “The Neanderthal Right quite regularly blames feminism for the collapse of the family and the menaces to childhood in our culture. But the woman who is left free to negotiate economic and other choices in a society where choice overall is more varied and more pressured is more at risk. There is so often a chain of violence and abuse transmitted from the powerless, childish male adult in a situation of deprivation to the still more powerless woman and onto the child; and these are chains unlikely to be broken without a clear feminist analysis of cycles of violence and powerlessness – as well as the broader economic transformations needed. To say this is also to recognise the need for critical work on male self-perception, especially the ways in which economic powerlessness reinforces the regressive aspects of ‘standard’ male behaviour and male bonding-machismo as a response to poverty or status uncertainty”.

Not only does blaming working women raise serious ethical problems (we have to work since men are so unreliable!) It is not based on any facts.

According to UNICEF British children are at the bottom of the wellbeing index, while Scandinavian children are at the top. Yet in Denmark the rate of lone parenthood is the highest. On the POP analysis this is inexplicable. The reason of course is that in Denmark there is an excellent social support system and much lower levels of child poverty. The welfare state, far from being part of the problem, is part of the solution.

Or is it sexual independence that is problematic? It’s difficult to see how we can go back to the pre-contraceptive pill era. When I left university in 1979, aged 21, I was unemployed so I had to live in a hostel run by a religious organisation. I went to the GP they had recommended to get some contraception, which the doctor refused me on the grounds that I was not married! Is that what Rutherford wants to restore? Or maybe the experience of my maternal grandmother who went to the doctor having given birth to six children and not wanting more - only to be told “that is woman’s lot”.

To go back on sexual autonomy for women is a non-starter.

Perhaps it is political and intellectual independence which is the worry, perhaps women should be excluded again from the professions and higher education? It is noticeable that Blue Labour seems to be an entirely male clique.

Hazel Blears in her typically common-sense contribution says – this anti-feminist stand is likely to alienate a large proportion of voters. She is right and not just women voters either!

But it is more serious than that. It is simply wrong to deny half the population freedoms and opportunities on the grounds of gender. In the opening essay Glasman says Labour lost the idea of what a person is – Kant is singled out for particular criticism. But reading Blue Labour on women and black people what is striking is that they seem to have no concept of a person. Rather than seeing all people as ends not means, they seem to take the view that some people are more “people” than others.

Blue Labour run away from the responsibilities that all parents and indeed all adults in a society have to provide for the security and wellbeing of children. They do not really appear to have given much thought to children and childhood and more sustained attention is needed to this.

By gendering so strongly adult roles, Blue Labour have lost sight of the fact that we are interdependent. Growing up, accepting responsibility, building reciprocity and mutuality is something we all have to do. Sometimes I will do what I want to do. Sometimes I will do what you want, simply to please you and sometimes because quite honestly I couldn't give a toss either way and don't want an argument. This is how most of us amble along in our close relationships and one thing that is a bit worrying about POP is that they don't seem very keen on compromising in private life that is if they act as they write. So why should we think they've got a good model for mutuality in social relationships and associations (like the party) still less in public policy?

In criticising women's independence and the role of the welfare state POP ignore some other powerful actors. Rutherford says, “Despite the greater independence it has brought women, they have borne the brunt of the changes. The strains placed on women's unpaid labour and time makes family life for many difficult to sustain. Economic participation has brought with it time poverty and work related stress. Research shows high levels of mental ill health amongst girls and women”. These statements are not simply patronising, they are offensive.

No mention is made of the role of the media in influencing attitudes and hence behaviour. In the area of gender relations – the insidious pornification of the media which warps expectations and normalises sexual violence is ignored. Doesn't it worry the authors of POP that in 2010 a high proportion of men surveyed said it wouldn't bother them, (i.e. it wouldn't prevent them from having sex with a prostitute) if she had been trafficked?

It is to this degrading extent that relations between the sexes can be de-humanised in modern Britain and yet Blue Labour, complain about women's independence.

To quote Rowan Williams again “Feminist ethics has had a vastly important role in unmasking the ways in which supposedly “disinterested” talk about ethics, sexual economic, financial, has an unacknowledged agenda that is to do with the control of some human beings by others.”

So where do Blue Labour get their ideas from? Rutherford quotes approvingly an essay by Roger Scruton (founder of the Salisbury Review) and quotes Wordsworth. There is something very perverse about this, of all the romantic poets why choose the Tory and not Shelley the radical, Blake the visionary, Byron the internationalist or John Clare the agricultural labourer?

All of this is a great shame, because the living wage would really benefit Sharon and the cuts to public services, public sector jobs and terms and conditions will affect her badly. She needs to be defended both as a worker by her trade union, but also by us as Labour, since we have found out that the lion's share of the deficit reduction will be borne by women.

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The Social Security System

For people like Sharon and her children, the welfare state is essential and it has now become quite tedious that rhetoric (on both sides) swamps reality in discussions about benefits in particular.

This family receives child benefit, which is one of the most popular and efficient benefits in the entire system. They receive tax credits (and once the over complex administration was addressed) these had the excellent result of both lifting 600,000 children out of poverty and incentivise mothers to work at least 20 hours a week, which had the very positive effect of raising from 40 to 60 per cent the number of lone parents working.

There is a consensus that reciprocity and responsibility should play a part in the benefits system which is why Beveridge's main plank in establishing it was a nationwide mutual system – national insurance contributions.

Nicholas Timmins' description of the founding period, The Five Giants, demonstrates some of the structural problems are unchanged from the beginning, namely the level of contributory benefits are generally too low to live on and so have to be supplemented with means tested allowances such as pension credit. Addressing poverty and maintaining reciprocity do not always pull in the same direction. This is one reason why addressing this is technically difficult, especially in a constrained fiscal environment and not simply a failure of "political will".

This is not to say that the current system does not need reform. It was obviously wrong – morally and economically that some householders could receive £1,000 per week in housing benefit, while carers mainly women in their fifties who save the tax payer billions, receive an allowance of £55 per week.

Yet the POP essays sound off like an unhealthy melange of the SWP and a Daily Mail editorial with statements such as “Tax credits boosting low wages propped up an anaemic private sector unable and unwilling to pay a living wage”, and “The old nation state welfare contract is discredited and in tatters”.

On education, Rutherford says, “a national system of apprenticeships and technical training and affordable access to higher education, all remain out of reach”. Yet who set up the Open University? Who built new universities in the sixties? Who established Sure Start? Who quadrupled apprenticeships between 1997 and 2010? Who ensured most children get 5 A-Cs at GCSE? Who set up union learn? Who enabled 2 million students to enter higher education? It is all very well having a critique, but it should be based on some knowledge of what has and is going on.

Reforming Public Services

Constituents come to their MPs with complaints when they have exhausted all the impersonal IT enabled communications and want a person to address them as a person and see the whole picture.

The risk aversion, hierarchy, insensitivity and bureaucracy of parts of the public sector must be addressed.

Thus it was that the private sector has been engaged in public service delivery. But this and the use of internal markets in the delivery of public services is now running up against the buffers. The difficulties of maintaining a motivated workforce, of genuinely transferring risk, of ensuring transparency and accountability are clear and the projected savings for the tax payer have frequently not materialised as countless PAC reports testify. Too much resource goes into complex contractual arrangements and financial engineering and new ventures like Social Impact Bonds do not look scalable.

Thus it is that partnerships and contracts with the voluntary sector have been established. This works well sometimes, particularly where it's not a simple universal services, but where the whole person must be addressed – an offender leaving prison say rather than the administration of child benefit.

When I moved from being a Treasury civil servant where I had worked for 16 years to the voluntary sector I suffered a huge culture shock. Gone was the security, structure, high level of resource. The voluntary sector was chaotic, risky and under-resourced. But it was also flexible, innovative and the passion and commitment for the client group was tangible.

Once upon a time – I mean in the period 1945-65 - this same spirit of hopefulness appears to have existed in the public sector too. One important issue we need to address is whether it can only be re-established through partnership with the other sectors or whether we could manage the public services well enough to secure both accountability to tax payers

and users (the real reason for targets etc) and flexibility and responsibility for professionals working in the system. While the private sector appears to have been taking too many risks recently, the public sector have taken too few – or at least the wrong kind of risk. Billions are wasted on mammoth IT projects while Jo in the local planning office is totally inflexible.

The boundaries between the three sectors have been blurred and we need to set out a clear rationale for what we do where and how.

If we want good national standards for certain key entitlements and we are not prepared to hand these over to a private sector “black box” (do what you like, as long as the targets – now called outcomes – are met) and if the voluntary sector loses its positive unique qualities when services are scaled up, it seems that we must re-address the way public services are run. I am not sure that the consistency and painstaking effort needed are really the forte of politicians, but losing patience with the public sector, which is basically what this government’s policy of privatisation amounts to is very irresponsible.

The Legacy of Empire

In another extraordinary outburst Rutherford writes;

“Individual self control, hard work and willingness to delay or forego reward and gratification provided social glue and the purposefulness of a national, imperial destiny!” And “There is in the air a feeling that shared morality and culture has been eroded....It is a reaction to the dispossession of men from their.....entitlement.”

This is drum and trumpet jingoism at its worst.

Many would say that it was the desire for gratification that produced the triangular trade of money (and beads) to slave traders operating in West Africa, slaves to the Caribbean and sugar back to Britain and that it was the unbearable exploitation of the black slaves which produced the wealth of the British Empire, (it certainly produced Barclays Bank).

Similar exploitative relationships were conducted via the East India Company and when uneven economic relationships were not enough the British were perfectly prepared to use their army and navy to “open up markets” as they did in the Opium wars against China.

It is true that globalisation benefits both poor countries and the rich in rich countries at the expense of the poor and badly educated in rich countries. It is also true that this is a problem we urgently need to address, but not by an absurd hankering for colonial relationships. (Perhaps it is agreeing Indian independence that prevents POP from putting Atlee in its canon of the elect!)

Building a sense of shared identity and belonging in a multicultural country like Britain is not a simple task. It involves ensuring everyone has equal civil and political rights; reforming institutions and enabling people to join in the national culture and share aspirations for the

future. To do this many things are needed and one of them is the feeling that their own personal story and that of their family is entwined with the national story.

We will not get to grips with this unless we understand – to quote Raphael Samuel again – “The history of Britain is for some four centuries a history of Empire”.

And that history is extraordinary because it is a history of people from around the world brought together by the largest empire the world has ever seen and its combination of economic exploitation, rhetoric of political liberation and pragmatic incorporation of indigenous cultures. This is why – for example – a black Guyanese schoolchild in Kentish Town shares the same surname as my white Anglo-Saxon children, both are descended from the same sugar plantation owner. And, more importantly, they are all entitled to the same political, social and economic rights here and now.

Another notable feature of POP is the way they refer only to English socialism. They are incredibly negative about the Scottish contribution and barely mention the Welsh. Are they assuming a fracturing of the nation? Again this seems mistaken in terms of both analysis and strategy.

On the vexed question of immigration from the A2 and A8 since 2001, the introduction to POP says “the exploitative use of cheap immigrant labour in a desperate attempt to fuel economic growth” is as if the influx was intentional. This is just factually wrong. The first group of people to come from Central Europe, as from the Horn of Africa, were of course refugees from extremely violent situations. It is to our credit as a nation that people were able to make a home here.

I’m afraid cock-up rather than conspiracy is the explanation on A2 and A8. With the benefit of hindsight it should have been obvious that giving residence; work permits and access to social security benefits at the same time that Germany and France denied these were a recipe for large scale immigration, especially given the difference in standards of living, economic opportunities and exchange rates. But the sad truth is that this was unexpected and unplanned. The officials’ forecast was for an influx of 30,000 not the 300,000 who came.

And given the very different historic relations there must be a real question as to whether the same moral and social obligations apply to these groups as to new commonwealth communities.

We need to ask these questions and address the cultural problem in multi-cultural communities about differences in values. It is worth looking at the important work on how to balance community rights and individual rights done by Kymlicka and the one real opportunity for introducing a modernised guild approach to our politics namely House of Lords Reform!

The Priest's Tale

I am sitting in the Stranger's Dining Room in the House of Commons – all gloomy dark green Victorian gothic, despite the fact that it's lunchtime on a brilliantly sunny day. The young priest who has a poor parish in a multi-cultural community in Central London is telling me about his dilemma. Because of the cuts, the local council is having to close its day centre for old people. This is the place where many old people who live alone can go from 9 till 5: it doesn't just provide lunch and company it's also a centre for other services the old people need and use. He has been thinking about setting up a lunch club to take its place, which would be staffed by volunteers, he thinks it can run two days a week: his bishop thinks it is a marvellous idea. But he is furious at being co-opted into Cameron's Big Society. He wants to speak out about the injustice: "It just won't be the same", he says. The Tories have made a catastrophic error in their Big Society project in that they have failed to understand that nowadays very many charities work in partnerships with local authority funding so the local authority cuts damage them too.

One of the rather grating things which politicians of all stripes do (and Blue Labour falls into this trap too) is to wheel on churches and mosques when it is convenient as examples of community-building – generators of social capital as economists would say – but then close their ears to the messages the faith groups bring.

Justice

The justice tradition is an ancient Old Testament tradition one might say the gift of the Jewish faith to western thought. The question, "if I cannot pay my debts why should my bed be taken from under me?" Proverbs (22:27) is absolutely relevant to thinking about loan sharks today. St Paul's approach involved a radical change, the invitation to redemption was extended from a select few to all – a new principle of equality. "There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for all of you are one..."

The churches are at the forefront of campaigns for the aid, fair-trade and debt relief, Glasman tells us he has worked with some of them on the living wage campaign. Despite all this he says "Labour values are not abstract universal values such as freedom or equality" If he is making a point about communicating with a large proportion of the voters he's probably right. Examples are better than principles and (even a mental) picture is better than a thousand words.

But he seems to be saying something more than this that principles themselves are worthless and that only ideas generated in England in the 1890's can be the basis for our politics now.

To say the very least it seems to be a tiny bit arrogant to jettison two and a half thousand years of thought and anyone born outside these islands. The notion of justice is deeply

embedded in our thought and teasing out its meaning has been one of the fruitful areas of political philosophy. Take these examples:

“A man is entitled to the fruits of his labour as long as, as much and as good are left for the next” – John Locke a foundational statement on inter-generational equity relevant to debates about climate change (17th century).

“Custom has rendered linen shirts and leather shoes necessary” - Adam Smith, possibly the first recognition that poverty is relative (18th century).

Most people in Britain have a fairly strong sense of justice (certainly of injustice), hence the outrage at bankers rewards, and surely a socialist party would want to work with this intuition, not against it?

And ideas of justice naturally lead to claims for equality and universal rights. Obama again: “Through the struggles...we have learned that the longing for freedom and human dignity is not English or American – it is universal and every citizen deserves a basic measure of security, healthcare, unemployment insurance, a dignified retirement”.

In fact POP’s position seems a bit confused; surely the living wage is a claim in justice for more equality? As the Treasury economists used to say, it works in practice but we can’t get it to work in theory.

Equality

In the 1980’s the Labour Party largely abandoned egalitarianism in favour of a sort of equal opportunities loosely based on John Rawl’s “Theory of Justice”. In this he argues that if one were standing behind a “veil of ignorance” and acting rationally, one would choose that level of inequality which left the whole community better off.

At the time I was rather unconvinced by this argument, because we do not stand behind veils of ignorance so it is very difficult to view these things totally objectively and of course in real life one of the key measures of fair processes (equal opportunities) is whether they produce equal outcomes. Hence the circularity in so many arguments about social mobility.

But there is a third argument put forcefully in the other main contribution, to the debate on “where Labour went wrong” in the “Spirit Level” published in 2009 by R Wilkinson and K Pickett (W+P).

This argues that equality is in fact correlated with many aspects of wellbeing and it is backed up with some impressive statistics. Health and education are correlated with income equality and this seems intuitively correct, but W & P argue that were we to prioritise equality everything else including trust, innovation and controlled CO2 emissions would improve. One might think that trust had more to do with the sort of homogeneous community POP are describing, but on this Pickett is as dogmatic in her red corner as POP

are in their blue corner. They both share a Casaubon like belief that they have found the key to all mythologies.

But isn't it more likely that what we need is a bit more equality and stronger communities? And that from a practical point of view there are a number of policies – housing – for example – where these will be mutually reinforcing.

Liberty

What is interesting is that neither POP nor Wilkinson and Pickett alight on one of the factors which seemed to disappoint the British people about the last Labour government, when it came to the general election and that was insufficient respect for liberty. What Ed Miliband has called being casual with our civil liberties.

There is a good case for arguing that actually the last government did allow Labour's bossy tendency too much free rein – and not just on the big issues like ID cards, 42 days and the DNA database, but also in allowing the development, especially at local authority level of a risk minimisation culture which is self-defeating. Thus in my own constituency I had cases of schools not taking children swimming because it was "too risky" for them to walk along the pavement to get there – even though that is how the children got to school. If we continue to defend this sort of approach we will lose touch with people who feel they are being treated in a petty way and that government is not on their side.

This is important in itself and because it hinders the state's capacity to be an effective enabler of justice and opportunities. To succeed in our objectives of equality we must build a consensus assuring people that it is on their side. So as we move forward and develop policy we need to make sure that we address the issue of the role of the state and the way it interacts with people. This is not simply a question of accountability within service delivery.

So just as the history is more complex than POP's description and just as the world is more complex than they allow so it is with ideas.

Everything cannot be reduced to one scale of measurement – the Neoliberals went overboard for markets; we should not go overboard for mutualism.

We need to weave a much richer fabric from many threads – solidarity, justice, equality, liberty, democracy, the needs of communities and the rights of individuals. The French Revolutionaries were actually brilliant in understanding the need to hold in tension liberty, equality and fraternity. And we need to be open to new ideas such as Amartya Sen's approach to development as freedom and the notion from South America that Mother Earth has rights too. I believe that this way we will be able to set out a far more optimistic, open and inclusive approach to the future.

Looking Forward

The idea of looking at tradition and change came out of a conversation I had with one of the parish priests in my constituency. In the North East there are many powerful and valuable traditions. In the past fifty years much has changed and this is frequently expressed as a strong sense of loss, particularly of community. Yet change is inevitable, and much of it is positive.

So I decided with a new CSM group to take a look at the themes and begin to consider which traditions are valuable and where change is needed. We met in May this year. By chance this coincided with the publication of the Politics of Paradox and the issues raised in those papers seemed to overlap considerably.

There is much in our Labour history to value and cherish, yet I feel that the analysis of Politics of Paradox have presented is unbalanced, incomplete and in some cases just plain wrong. What they say about the importance of secure communities with strong ties of reciprocity, self reliance and mutual support is all true and they are right to remind us of it.

I wanted to look at Blue Labour's ideas from the perspectives of actual communities and people I know.

So in the Reeve's tale we see that we need to go beyond a community based approach because the impact of globalisation on domestic markets- in this case agricultural trade- necessitates a government and international institutions which can negotiate on their behalf. Moreover the current arrangements need to be radically reformed in the interests of the environment and small and not very powerful producers across the globe.

We see too that the overly bureaucratic relationship between state and citizen undermines policy intentions and that interventions need to go beyond addressing market failures. The Government must hold the ring and stand up to the powerful on behalf of the powerless.

In the Miner's tale there are similar themes about petty-fogging bureaucracy and internationalism. The Blue Labour proposals are probably most relevant to this agenda, but even here they need to be supplemented with an active role for local and national government in creating economic and educational opportunities and success, on which personal and family wellbeing depend. Government at every level needs the capacity to look ahead and build partnerships and co-ordinate effective actions.

It is always wrong to scapegoat victims and the Mother's tale demonstrates how unjust and unreasonable the prejudices displayed in Politics of Paradox are and how inappropriate their failure to re-evaluate our colonial history.

We learned a great deal in the 20th century- much of it painfully. Two World Wars, genocide, state imposed human rights abuses demonstrated the need for the UN Declaration on

Human Rights. The invitation to a full share in what society offers should be open to everyone and the liberation of women and black people is to be celebrated.

We also learned that Government at its best can mobilise the resources to provide security and promote opportunities. In the 20th Century we extended the state's role to economic and social protection and in the case of health, pensions, education and employment levels, we had many successes. The Coalition government's massive cuts programme is putting these achievements at risk and to secure them we will need to renegotiate and clarify the boundaries between the public, private and voluntary sectors.

We need to re-energise the public service with an ethos which builds the capacity of those who work in it to innovate, be flexible and sensitive to individual need.

Finally the Priest's tale demonstrates two things. First that people cannot and many will not play a constructive role if they feel they are being used, exploited or patronised. The voluntary sector is good at many things, but it cannot replace mainstream public services nor should it be expected to do so. Second, democratic engagement is vital. Building an inclusive country will involve risks and experiments but if we are open to new possibilities, there will be pleasant surprises on the way.

We have a culture rich in ideas and many people can make a contribution, if they are given a stake in the economic, social and political institutions which determine the shape of society.